
The first exhibition to put works by Lacy and Helguera in conversation, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus* presents two early social-practice pieces, both featuring interventions in Latin America. Lacy's *Skin of Memory* began as a project in 1999 in Barrio Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia, a region known for territorialized conflict and crime. Lacy was invited by local non-governmental organizations, through anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, to develop youth leadership through public art workshops, engaging non-partisan collective memory as an alternative to violence. A group of young people interviewed a third of the barrio's 2,000 households and retrieved objects loaded with the personal memories of those who had lost their lives to violence. Five hundred artifacts composed the "Museo Arqueológico del Barrio Antioquia" (Barrio Antioquia's Archaeological Museum), which took the form of the titular "Bus," in order to circulate and allow people from different quarters of the barrio to view the objects without crossing into hostile turf. Residents who boarded the bus could write letters to an unknown neighbor expressing their aspirations for the future of the barrio. The letters were later delivered in a festive procession.



Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá. *Skin of Memory*, 1999; installation view, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, 2017. Courtesy of AD&A Museum

In *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, Pablo Helguera traversed the Americas through the Pan-American highway, beginning in Anchorage, Alaska, and concluding in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. In his twenty-nine stops, Helguera set up the Schoolhouse, a structure made of yellow tent fabric and wood, where “he collaborated with local

organizations and individuals in participatory workshops that were a hybrid of performance art and experimental education.”³ These workshops produced the “Panamerican Addresses”—impromptu public statements containing participants’ concerns and wishes about their city or artistic community, which were later read in semiformal presentations and featured in text and video in the Santa Barbara exhibition.

The curators viewed their mission as partly pedagogical: to introduce and articulate the wider concept of “social-practice art” as performance-based, activist-oriented, and reliant on “audience participation.”⁴ Gonzales situates Lacy’s and Helguera’s works within this narrative, using documentary videos and participant-generated texts to present the voices of participants alongside the artists’ perspectives in *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*. Both pieces, Gonzales claims, “respond to cultural and political concerns, and promote the empowerment and transformation of communities.”

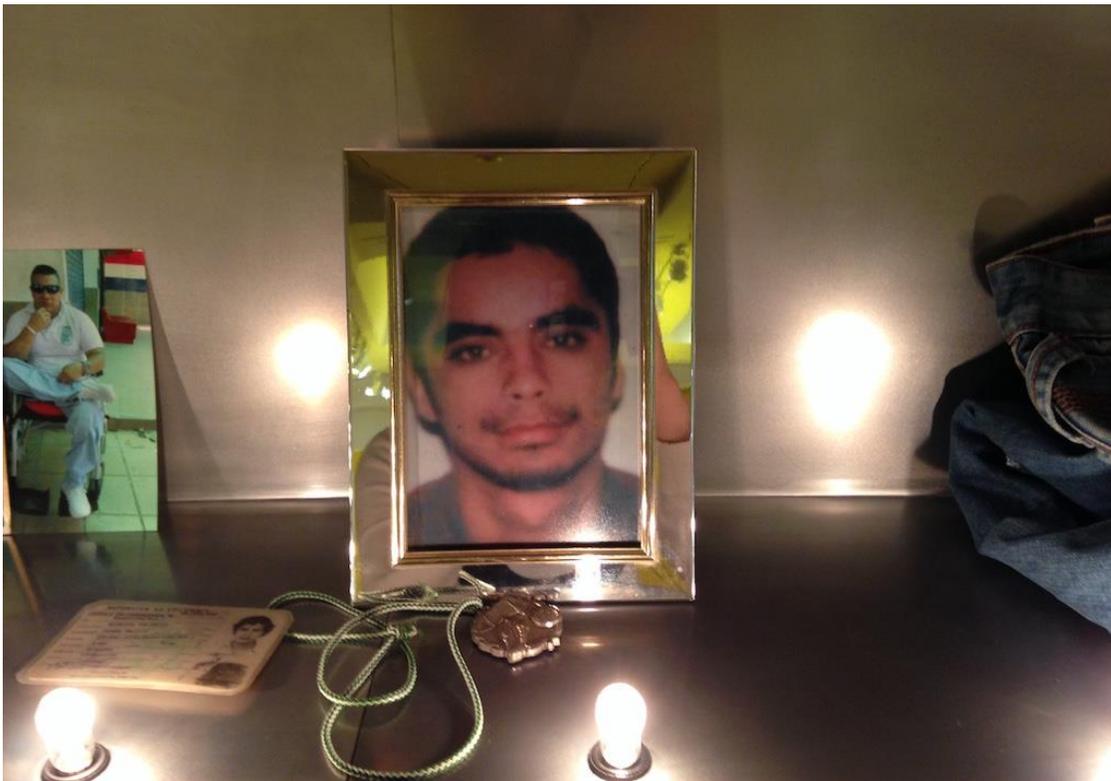


Pablo Helguera. *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2006; installation view inside makeshift schoolhouse, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, 2017. Courtesy of AD&A Museum.

Both artists allude to ethics and transparency as paramount in social-practice art, in these two projects and more broadly. As Helguera explains: “Artists can never ‘disappear’ as authors or instigators of a socially engaged project because authorship also means accountability.”⁵ Lacy shared an encounter with ethical concerns in her own practice: “I have a series of interviews with young women who are talking about their bodies while they are pregnant. And I agreed that I wouldn’t show [the videos] unless I came back to [the women]. So I’m sitting for twenty years now on videotapes that I

can't really show, although they'd make a really nice artwork, because there's that relationship—do people know the context that they're going to move into when they're part of an artist's work?"

Helguera also cautions against ulterior motives for social-practice art, drawing a clear line between “social art” and “social work.” “Many artists who do social practice claim that their work is for the community,” he told us, “but in fact is more of an investment in their personal reputations.” In contrast, Helguera described an encounter in Frontera Corozal, a border town between Mexico and Guatemala, with late artist Aníbal López, considered to be one of the most important conceptual artists from Guatemala: “He was taking photos of the residents asking them to do a variety of actions. He very bluntly told me at some point that his work was not for the community but for the art world.” López's honesty, Helguera argues, is preferable to the false humanitarianism that can infect social art practices.



Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá. *Skin of Memory*, 1999; installation view with detail of objects collected for the bus, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, 2017. Courtesy of AD&A Museum

As two early North American social practice artists working in Latin and South American contexts, Lacy and Helguera also confronted their positions in geopolitical power dynamics. We discussed their roles in relation to the United States and how the communities they visited perceived this issue. “I think it's ridiculous to even consider

working in other countries if you don't understand what you present and what you represent," Lacy told us. "The best you can do is keep those issues available and transparent."

Helguera similarly proposes that artists recognize their positions as outsiders and strive for transparency in their processes. He criticizes what he calls the "biennialist" syndrome—"the tendency to parachute artists into random cities and countries to make an artwork about that place, often with little engagement with the local reality. We know that a lot of site-specific work can mean well but is often misguided."⁶

Lacy framed this concern in terms of the "quality of engagement." She raised the example of artist Carsten Höller and his piece *Fara Fara*, a video installation about rap battles in Congo. "I liked it a lot, it had a lot of life and movement and scale," Lacy said, before questioning the quality of the engagement between artist and community: "Did he come in for a week and make friends with a bunch of rap artists who loved to be on video anyway, and they all rapped and called each other 'bro' and shook each other by the hand and left—I mean, is that the relationship?"



Pablo Helguera. *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2006; installation view of travel documents and souvenir flags, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, 2017. Courtesy of AD&A Museum.

As a corrective measure, Lacy emphasized the importance of long-term collaboration with the local population in her work, instead of temporary intervention. “My friend Tom Trevor used to call it the ‘center of gravity,’” she told us, as in “where is the center of gravity in the work?”

For Lacy, the best social-practice works place local community members at the “center of gravity.” Lacy was adamant in the co-authorship of her piece, giving credit to Riaño-Alcalá, who originally invited Lacy to work in Barrio Antioquia. *Skin of Memory* is also accompanied by a list of participants. Meanwhile, Helguera conveys collective authorship in *The School of Panamerican Unrest* through place-based addresses, which were written and signed by participants in each city. In contrasting these two approaches, Reisman reiterates the artists’ autonomy in outlining authorship, asserting that, in a social-practice art piece, the artist is ultimately responsible for determining how they define the collective that contributed to the making of the work.



Pablo Helguera. *School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2006; installation view of schoolhouse banner and wall-mounted diary entries, *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, 2017. Courtesy of AD&A Museum.

Both artists deny the idea of artist as interceding hero, though Helguera’s road trip along the Pan-American highway seemed to allude to a call to adventure. Still, Helguera argues that “one should not look at the project as providing any sort of ‘final’ or

‘definitive’ or ‘authoritative’ look at anything, but just as a journey that provides a snapshot in time of the issues and concerns of people in the Americas.”

Participatory art intrinsically brings forth matters of audiences, participation, and authorship. Its contextual, performative quality, however, makes exhibiting social-practice art particularly challenging. “That is something a lot of social-practice exhibitions struggle with,” Gonzales says, “trying to achieve a level of visual engagement. So much of these projects are out of their original context, so representing them oftentimes becomes more of an archival exercise than a visual one.”

Co-curator Sara Reisman added that Helguera, Lacy, and Riaño-Alcalá all “questioned the efficacy of an exhibition that relies heavily on the display of objects to adequately capture and represent their respective works.”⁷ In order to generate aesthetic interest, the curators used the physical reconstruction of Helguera’s “Schoolhouse” and the replication of a shelf from Lacy’s and Riaño-Alcalá’s “Bus” as central exhibition objects. These objects served as iconic emblems of *Skin of Memory* and *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, around which the curators presented documentary videos, photographs, diary entries, and participant interviews.

Lacy admitted that she and Riaño-Alcalá struggled to represent the experience and impact of their project. They included a timeline of U.S.-Colombian relations in the exhibition, which provided context for the work but risked reducing *Skin of Memory* to a history lesson.



Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá. *Skin of Memory*, 1999; installation view with detail of timeline accompanying work. Courtesy of AD&A Museum.

Recognizing that exhibitions of social-practice art are inherently documentary, Helguera nonetheless remains committed to its presence in the museum. “Exhibitions can be enormously inspirational,” he tells us. “I think it is perfectly possible for an exhibition to be both documentary and also motivate others to further the practice.”

How can artists and curators properly relay these collective and relational experiences so as to stay true to their original project, purposes, and duration, while also engaging the audience visually and discursively? How to escape mere documentation, extending the reach of these artworks beyond their firsthand participants?

The Schoolhouse and the Bus does not definitively answer these questions. Rather, it amplifies a growing conversation on social-practice art. The exhibition invites viewers to grapple with the validity of this contested form, the ethical implications of the works, and the difficulty of representing them in a museum setting. “It’s really important, art-historically,” Reisman reiterates, “that [social-practice art] has a presence in these cultural spaces, because otherwise, for a lot of audiences, it’s hard to recognize it as art.”

The Schoolhouse and the Bus will be on view at the 8th Floor Gallery of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, New York, NY, February 9–May 12, 2018. It was on view at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum, Santa Barbara, CA, from September 27–December 8, 2017.

Notes

1. Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping The Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Bay Press, 1994).
2. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011).
3. Elyse Gonzales and Sara Reisman, ed., *The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Pedagogy, Mobility, Engagement* (Black Dog Publishing, 2018), 44.
4. Ibid., 7. In the forthcoming exhibition catalog, co-curator Elyse A. Gonzales describes social-practice art, also known as socially engaged art, as “notable for its emphasis on performance, activism, and, often, non-object-centered art making,” and a field “reliant on audience participation generated through time-based events such as performances, conversations, and workshops.”
5. Ibid., 27
6. Ibid., 85–86. Pablo Helguera, in conversation with Suzanne Lacy.
7. Ibid., 43